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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y ADDED SENSITIVE

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
DEPT FOR SCA, DRL, AND G/TIP
DRL/ILCSR FOR TRACY HAILEY AND TU DANG
G/TIP FOR MEGAN HALL
DOL/ILAB FOR CHARITA CASTRO, TINA MCCARTER, AND SEROKA MIHAIL
ASTANA FOR ALMATY/USAID

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [ELAB](#) [KCRM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: EDUCATION MINISTRY ON ANTI-CHILD LABOR EFFORTS;
EDUCATION REFORM

REF: TASHKENT 73

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1. (U) Summary: During a meeting on February 23, Ministry of Public Education officials discussed their efforts to combat child labor during the cotton harvest season. They reported that Uzbekistan's transition from 9-year to 12-year mandatory free secondary education, a major reform, would be fully implemented ahead of schedule in 2009. The officials also described the government's significant investments in the refurbishment of old schools and opening of new schools in recent years, particularly in rural areas. In contrast to other regions such as South Asia, the impact of child labor on the education of Uzbek children appears limited. Some Uzbek schoolchildren still miss school for several weeks a year to participate in the cotton harvest (reftel), but since they attend school six days a week and enjoy fewer vacations throughout the year, they ultimately have at least as many classroom hours as students in the United States. Separately, contacts provided Emboffs with additional government statistics on Uzbekistan's systems of secondary and higher education (septels). End summary.
"STEP-BY-STEP PROGRESS" ON COMBATING CHILD LABOR

2. (U) On February 23, poloff met with Ministry of Public Education Planning Department for Educational Institutions Chief Bakhtiyor Daniyarov and International Cooperation Department Head Hikmatilla Daminov, who described the Ministry's efforts to combat the use of schoolchildren to pick cotton during Uzbekistan's harvest each fall (a long-standing practice that has continued since the Soviet era). Citing Uzbekistan's adoption last year of a new law on children's rights, ILO anti-child labor conventions (as of March 10, ILO now recognizes Uzbekistan's adoption of ILO Conventions 182 and 138), and a National Action Plan on their implementation, Daniyarov argued that the government was making "step-by-step progress" combating child labor, while also noting that "reality cannot be changed in a minute." "We do not want our kids to work, we want them to study at school," he emphasized.

3. (U) Daniyarov asserted that his Ministry was playing a key

role in the implementation of the National Action Plan. He explained that his office in Tashkent had passed along copies of the National Action Plan, as well as a separate government order from October explaining the illegality of mobilizing children for the cotton harvest, to all of the Ministry's branches at the provincial and district level throughout the country. According to Daniyarov, he made sure that all of its regional officials had "learned the documents by heart."

ANTI-CHILD LABOR MATERIAL TO BE DISTRIBUTED THROUGH SCHOOLS

14. (U) Daniyarov showed poloff copies of several pamphlets on the worst forms of child labor, which he said were printed in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor. The glossy pamphlets, in both Russian and Uzbek, looked professionally-designed and clearly listed cotton picking as a dangerous form of labor in which children under the age of 18 should not participate. The pamphlets also listed other worst forms of child labor and cited Uzbekistan's recent adoption of ILO anti-child labor conventions. He reported that enough copies of the pamphlet would be printed this year to distribute to each of the 5,180,217 children currently studying in Uzbekistan's schools. The Ministry also plans to distribute additional copies to teachers and local officials. Daniyarov further reported that the Ministry had prepared similar posters on the worst forms of child labor which were to be distributed and displayed in schools.

15. (U) Daniyarov argued that such awareness-raising activities were especially critical for combating child labor, as he noted that many of Uzbekistan's farmers were "poorly educated" and ignorant about the government's recent legal reforms. He noted that if farmers "hear that there will be rain, they will immediately rush to gather school children to pick cotton" before the rain damages their cotton crop and reduces its value (Note: While Daniyarov did not directly allude to last fall's harvest, knowledgeable observers suggested this is exactly what had occurred. Early in the harvest, observers noted

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that there were fewer schoolchildren picking cotton than in previous years. However, after the fall rains began earlier than normal, the number of schoolchildren observed picking cotton noticeably increased. While Daniyarov was clearly laying blame on private farmers for the use of child labor during the cotton harvest, local officials also play some role in mobilizing schoolchildren in some areas, the extent of which varies considerably by region. End note.)

DATABASE OF DELINQUENT STUDENTS CREATED

16. (U) Daniyarov reported that the Ministry had created a central database of students who habitually missed school. The information will be used to identify truants, whose parents would then be contacted by teachers, school officials, and mahalla (neighborhood council) representatives. Each province has its own head juvenile delinquency inspector, while additional inspectors worked at the district level. In addition, each regional hokimiyat (administration) has the power to convoke a special commission with representatives from the local branches of the Ministries of Education and Interior and the General Prosecutor's Office, to examine specific cases of truants. Daniyarov also observed that students not only missed school to work in agriculture, but also to work at bazaars, cafes, and other locations, though he maintained that the overall number of such delinquents was relatively low.

RELUCTANCE TO SHARE CHILD LABOR STATISTICS

17. (SBU) Daniyarov was reluctant to discuss whether the Ministry maintained estimates of how many children missed school to participate in the cotton harvest each fall, though he said the Ministry was "now working to collect such statistics." Daniyarov might have felt constrained to talk openly about this sensitive matter in the presence of Daminov, as "International Cooperation Department" staff at Uzbekistan's ministries are widely believed to report directly to the National Security Service. In contrast, ILO and UNICEF previously have reported that officials occasionally have been more candid with them.

THE COTTON KING

18. (SBU) Daniyarov did note that

conditions for schoolchildren picking cotton had much improved since independence in 1991. While he allowed that children still picked cotton, he observed that they did so for much shorter periods of time than the Soviet era, when students, including himself, missed school for months at a time each fall (Note: We have heard more or less the same from many individuals, including contacts and ordinary citizens.

Schoolchildren involved in the cotton harvest now appear to miss between one and six weeks of school each fall, see reftel. End note.) Revealing how ingrained cotton is in the local culture, Daniyarov reminisced with pride being recognized as a "champion cotton picker" while a student, claiming that he routinely collected more than 120 kilos of cotton.

CONVERSION TO MANDATORY 12-YEAR EDUCATION ALMOST COMPLETE

¶9. (U) Daniyarov also talked more generally about the government's educational reform plan and its investment in new schools and colleges, particularly in rural regions. He reported that Uzbekistan's transition from 9-year to 12-year mandatory free secondary education, which authorities have been gradually introducing since 2007, would be fully implemented two years ahead of schedule in 2009. Students will now attend primary and secondary schools to grade 9, and then colleges (vocational schools) or lyceums (academic-focused high schools) for grades 10 through 12. He noted that Tashkent had already completed the transition, with the rest of the provinces to follow this year.

INVESTMENT IN NEW RURAL SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

¶10. (U) To accommodate the switch to a 12-year schooling system, Daniyarov reported that the government has invested enormous sums in the past few years to build new colleges and lyceums. Since 1997, when the construction of new colleges and lyceums began in earnest, he reported that more than 1,100 such colleges and lyceums have been opened in all regions of the country (Comment: Anecdotally, this rings true: virtually every town we visit appears to have a new college or lyceum. End comment.) In addition, the government has

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invested large resources into refurbishing old primary and secondary schools and building new ones. Since 2004, Daniyarov reported the government has refurbished 6,504 primary and secondary schools, 80 percent of them in rural regions. He also noted that another 1,957 schools will be renovated in 2009. In total, he reported that the government had invested approximately 1.6 billion dollars in schools in recent years.

MOST RESIDENTS WANT JOBS, NOT NEW SCHOOLS

¶11. (SBU) While some residents are clearly proud of their new colleges and lyceums, many others have complained to poloff about the enormous sums authorities have spent to construct them, observing that the majority of their students will not find jobs (or university slots, see septel) upon graduation. One resident sarcastically referred to the schools as "shrines to the unemployed." Clearly, most residents would rather have seen the money spent on programs or projects that would have generated greater employment opportunities for local residents. Others residents have noted that school construction has provided lucrative kickback opportunities for local officials and their cronies.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) The child labor situation in Uzbekistan is quite different from that in South Asian countries, such as India or Pakistan, where significant numbers of children work full-time and routinely miss school. In contrast, school attendance (as well as literacy) is nearly universal in Uzbekistan. While students miss some school each year due to the cotton picking season, most students miss less than three weeks due to the harvest, which is then sometimes made up during later school vacations. As students in Uzbekistan also attend school half-day on Saturdays and enjoy fewer vacations throughout the year than elsewhere, the vast majority of Uzbek schoolchildren experience just as many (if not more) classroom hours each year as their American counterparts. While exceptions do exist and students in some areas pick cotton for longer amounts of time, these are the exceptions, not the norm. The government also has clearly invested large sums in refurbishing older schools and building new schools in recent years, particularly in rural regions, to accommodate the transition to a 12-year mandatory educational

system, a significant and positive development. While teacher salaries remain low and resources are often scarce, residents appear to be less concerned about the quality of primary and secondary education itself than the fact that their children face extremely limited employment opportunities upon graduation. The number of slots for students to attend university is also limited (septel).

¶13. (SBU) The most effective strategy for combating the use of child labor during Uzbekistan's cotton harvest is to encourage the government to continue cooperation with UNICEF and to invite a new ILO representative to serve in Tashkent. We should also recommend that ILO send a delegation to Tashkent to meet with senior Uzbek officials. In addition, we believe that ILO and/or UNICEF could most effectively engage the Uzbeks in the context of a regional program involving neighboring countries with similar problems. This way, the Uzbeks are less likely to feel that they are being singled out for criticism. Any regional program should not aim at eradicating child labor overnight (an unrealistic goal), but rather should present a long-term strategy that addresses broader and related issues, such as rural poverty, unemployment, labor migration, and the perverse effects of cotton quotas. The U.S. Department of Labor can also play a role by providing funding for a regional ILO anti-child labor project involving Uzbekistan, as they have done in previous years.

NORLAND